Spain’s Podemos party on verge of split before Vistalegre II congress

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In the weeks leading up to its Vistalegre II congress opening today in Madrid, an extraordinary crisis has erupted inside Spain’s Podemos party. The party that proclaimed itself an “electoral war machine” fighting for the people against a corrupt “caste” of pro-austerity Spanish politicians is now threatened with dissolution, by the admission of its leaders themselves, as they denounce each other as sell-outs and would-be dictators.

The university lecturers who occupy the party’s top two positions, General Secretary Pablo Iglesias and Political Secretary Íñigo Errejón, are engaged in a vicious faction fight. Gone is the time after Podemos’ foundation in 2014 when the two spoke of their collaboration—Iglesias praising the “rare intellectual complicity” uniting him with Errejón, while Errejón thanked Iglesias for teaching him how to practice “the art of war … methodically and with persistence.”

Significantly, none of the factions involved in the increasingly bitter fight inside Podemos can give a coherent accounting for their criticisms of their rivals inside the party. What is emerging very clearly, however, is the reactionary character of Podemos, which is moving sharply to the right.

Since December, as ever broader sections of Podemos backed Errejón or declined to sign common positions with Iglesias—including Podemos’ members in Spain’s second and third cities, Barcelona and Valencia—Iglesias has turned on his lieutenant. Ignoring the fact that he himself championed ties with the big-business Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), he is attacking Errejón’s factional manoeuvres and support for ties to the PSOE. Iglesias says that this could destroy Podemos, turning it into a corrupt electoral machine.

“It is of fundamental importance that Podemos not become a coalition of currents, a party of feudal barons, a party divided for all time that is like a cake, where each leader says: this is my part, so I want so much money and so many jobs … If we do things this way, we will only become the PSOE, and we’ll be dead,” Iglesias said shortly before the New Year.

Errejón’s supporters respond that Iglesias’ ties with members of the Stalinist Communist Party (PCE) and of the PCE-led United Left (IU) coalition, whom he is bringing into his secretariat, will produce a dictatorial regime inside the party.

Even though it has always been well known that Iglesias began his career in the PCE youth movement, Podemos founding member Luis Alegre warned that “conspirators [are] about to take control of Podemos.” He added, “I believe this is something that will almost certainly happen, because they are going to be able to infest Pablo [Iglesias] to destroy the organization.”

Errejón’s supporters oppose Iglesias’ ties with IU also because they see them as an obstacle to developing alliances beyond “left” parties, that is, with the political right. One of their documents states, “Podemos must remain an autonomous and independent organization. ... Our objective is much more ambitious than the unity of the left, it is the unity of the people and the citizens, which includes the traditional left but goes well beyond it.”

On this basis, Errejón’s supporters have refused to support traditional resolutions from IU and sections of Podemos around Iglesias for lifting the reactionary 1977 amnesty law for the crimes of fascism, passed in the closing years of the fascist regime of Francisco Franco.

Significantly, some of these criticisms are now echoed by parts of Podemos’ Anticapitalistas faction, the Spanish affiliates of France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

Warning in anti-communist tones that Iglesias might “impose” his positions, Santiago Alba Rico wrote in Anticapitalistas’ Viento Sur web site: “Now some of us have never seen the risk that we could become a new PSOE, except insofar as we aspire to restore the symbolic and political capital that the PSOE had in 1982, in order to carry out a completely distinct policy. We do, however, see the very serious danger that we may become a new United Left or—even worse—that Vistalegre II will recast the old—the oldest—Communist Party.”

Anticapitalistas has however tried to maintain unity between the pro-Iglesias and pro-Errejón factions, generally defending the line of Iglesias. Anticapitalistas leader Miguel Urbán has declared that “this is not the moment for Errejón to lead Podemos. We will see if that moment comes.” Asked if he would side with Iglesias in the future leadership contest, Urbán answered: “we would support [Iglesias] in some agreements.”

These conflicts expose the bankruptcy of Podemos’ populist, nationalist and pro-capitalist politics, theoretically rooted in a postmodernist rejection of Marxism and the revolutionary role of the working class by affluent layers of the middle class. Podemos promised a different policy from the PSOE, based on demagogic attacks on the banks and the “caste”—all the while recruiting layers of the Spanish officer corps, speaking to audiences of bankers and businessmen, and orienting to the European Union (EU). This program is collapsing under the weight of its insoluble contradictions.

The last year has proven devastating for Podemos’ ambitions. A year ago, it hoped to emerge as the main beneficiary of the devastating collapse of the two-party system that had ruled Spain since the 1978 Transition from the Franco regime to parliamentary democracy. A hung parliament emerged in the December 20, 2015 elections: neither the PSOE nor the Popular Party (PP), the conservative heirs of Franco, had a majority. For nearly a year, Spain could not form a government.

This reflected deep popular disillusionment with the pro-business policies they had pursued since the PSOE took power in 1982, particularly amid the EU austerity drive after the 2008 Wall Street crash, and Spain’s participation in NATO wars since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. With nearly a quarter of Spain’s working population and half of its youth unemployed, and poverty soaring, explosive social anger was building in the working class.

The Podemos leadership devised a strategy of allying with IU, hoping to overtake the PSOE’s electoral weight and emerge as the dominant partner in an anti-PP coalition with the PSOE. The failure of this strategy in the June 26, 2016 elections—in which the Podemos-IU alliance lost nearly 1

million votes compared to the 2015 elections, failed to overtake the PSOE, and a new hung parliament emerged—set the stage for the current crisis inside Podemos.

This failure was the product of growing popular distrust of the pro-capitalist, pro-EU perspective of Podemos. Its Greek ally, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' Syriza government, was repudiating all his promises to the electorate, ruthlessly imposing austerity policies dictated by the EU, after Tsipras trampled the "no" vote in the July 2015 referendum on austerity he himself organised.

At the same time, Podemos' orientation to the PSOE and its steady progress into the middle levels of the capitalist state brought them ever more into conflict with the working class. They have witnessed first hand the Podemos-backed "governments of change" running major cities including Madrid, Barcelona, Cadiz, Zaragoza, Valencia and Santiago de Compostela.

These have reduced their debts by at least €2.3 billion and earned the applause of the banks. In the words of Cádiz mayor José María González (a Podemos member), "even the [Ministry of the] Treasury recognises that the local town councils of change do their homework." Barcelona mayor Ada Colau, who rules the city in alliance with local Podemos officials, ruthlessly suppressed the March 2016 Barcelona metro strike.

In an interview in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Guillermo Lázaro from Podemos' local front Zaragoza en Común said "You can't change a city in a year and a half. People weren't really hoping for a real change in their living conditions, they just wanted people to come to office who were normal people, who looked like them."

Above all, Podemos officials' constant planning and discussion in the mass media of an alliance with the PSOE only underscored that, like Tsipras, they had no real differences with the austerity policies of the EU and the European social democrats.

The decision of leading figures in the Spanish ruling class, desperate to avoid a third inconclusive election, to violently impose a PP government only further discredited Podemos. A small cabal of bankers, CEOs, intelligence officials and top politicians—led by former PSOE Prime Minister Felipe González and speaking through the pages of the daily *El País*—worked closely with the PP to impose an unpopular minority PP government.

They ousted then-PSOE party secretary Pedro Sánchez, the leading advocate in the PSOE of an alliance with Podemos, and forced the PSOE to tacitly back the minority PP government. This event highlighted the links between Podemos and not only the PSOE but the political right, insofar as Podemos had aggressively courted the social democrats, who emerged as the key support of an unpopular PP government in Spain.

The three positions at the Vistalegre II conference—the Iglesias, Errejón, and Anticapitalistas factions—reflect varying strategies to strengthen Podemos' weight inside the state machine despite the exposure of its reactionary policies. They are all cynical and false, however, insofar as all share the same anti-Marxist policy and anti-worker orientation, and none offers an alternative to the bankrupt policy Podemos has pursued until now.

Errejón's supporters take aim at Iglesias' reaction to the PSOE putsch—his call for a "back to the streets" campaign to try to drum up more popular support and strengthen Podemos' electoral position by joining protest actions by the union bureaucracy. Denouncing this strategy, which Errejón arrogantly dismissed as pandering to a "noisy minority," they demand greater freedom to manoeuvre inside Podemos and closer integration into the capitalist state, based on nationalism, populism, gender politics and alliances with the PSOE.

This is bound up with an ever more explicit rejection of any presence for Podemos outside the media and state machine, and ever more explicit recognition of the right-wing implications of their nationalism and hostility to the working class.

Writing for Errejón's position, Germán Caro declares, "It would be a great mistake if the debates within Podemos limited themselves to aiming to provide a pale rerun of the historical debates internal to the Spanish left. Podemos requires a less vertical, more decentralized, and more feminized structure in all its spheres of action. … This requires a democratic organisation internally that, in short, can critically and patiently work on the slow acquisition of influence and prestige within the media and civil society."

Asked whether such a nationalist and pro-establishment orientation could lead sections of Podemos to adopt fascist-populist policies, Errejón replied that he thought Podemos would prevent the rise of a far-right party in Spain, because it occupies the same political "space" as the far right, thanks to Podemos' "popular and patriotic discourse".

He said, "the difference between a democratic and open populism and reactionary populism is who is the enemy. The question is who provides a sense or who constructs that national community. It is true that the Popular Party has occupied the space of Francoism, but I think the other space, the possibility of a nation constructing itself against the weak, that of fascist populism, I think we occupy that space."

Errejón's positions enjoy the support of powerful factions of the ruling elite, including *El País*, the post-Franco paper of record that strongly backed the September PSOE putsch. Last month it carried an editorial announcing that "In front of Iglesias, who calls for free hands to his personal power ... Errejón defends a much more modern, democratic and open Podemos, totally different from the confusion generated by Iglesias around a strategy of ideological radicalization and street mobilisation whose effect is to dilute the strength and negotiating capacity of the party in Parliament and the institutions."

The criticisms made of Errejón's positions by Iglesias' supporters, and their defense of the "back to the streets" campaign, are empty and politically fraudulent, however. The purpose of this campaign is not to prosecute the class struggle or to shift policy, but to boost Podemos' weight in the state institutions by falsely appearing to take a more "radical" stance of opposition, not just to the PP, but also to the entire Transition regime.

Writing in support of Iglesias and against Errejón's criticisms, Pedro Honrubia Hurtado states, "When invoking the false dilemma—the 'street' or the 'institutions'—a dilemma which no one really contemplates in Podemos, what they refer to in reality is a choice between these two previously described strategies. Now it is time to decide which to adopt. I support the first one as this would have us be the opposition to the regime of '78 in its entirety, and not a mere institutional opposition to the PP in its struggle with PSOE, and would entail exposing those who for such a long time now have ruled for the privileged few and abandoned the people in every possible way."

Workers are sceptical, however, of Podemos' claims to represent an alternative to the Transition regime or about its ties to the unions, who have in any case been discredited by their failure to organise opposition to the EU austerity drive. One reason for this is that Iglesias himself has at various points openly declared, with unparalleled cynicism, that Podemos' calls for change through street protests were lies.

Thus in July, right after the June 26 general elections, Iglesias declared that change should occur through state institutions, because the "stupid things we used to say when we were far-left, that things change on the streets and not in the institutions, are lies."

In October, Iglesias again stressed that his populist rhetoric did not aim to shift policy, but to help Podemos reach a better position for compromise with the other major parties—which would inevitably be at the expense of the workers. He said that Podemos' "populism ends when politics culminate in [public] administration, when administrative decisions have to be taken from the state, the town hall or the party." He added, "If we rule, we will look for compromises and consensus, and we

would openly say that our populism has ended, that it was useful in the fight."

As for the Anticapitalistas, they have sought to reconcile Iglesias' "back to the streets" campaign with Errejón's call for total entry into the capitalist state.

"Podemos cannot offer an isolated response," writes Isabel Serra, "but it needs, instead, to look to articulate it within a social and political alternative alongside other social forces, all over the state, and be able to generate a dynamic cycle of social demands and mobilisations. This step will undoubtedly go through the institutions—these institutions that are known to be not neutral—where the goal should be that of changing these and using them as platforms from where to build our positions in such a way as to allow us to give voice to those who do not have it and continue to promote the self-organisation of social majorities ..."

Claims by Anticapitalistas or Iglesias' supporters that Podemos represents an alternative mobilising opposition to the post-Transition regime are political lies. In the face of deep social distress and popular anger, it defends the PSOE and the entire post-Franco set-up. It does not represent an alternative, but an attempt to repair the slightly frayed alliance between the PSOE, the PCE, and pseudo-left forces like Anticapitalistas that suppressed revolutionary struggles of the working class against the fascist Franco regime and preserved capitalism during the Transition in the 1970s.

As infighting erupts between Podemos' factions, the criticisms the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) made of this party from its foundation have been vindicated. Based on the heritage of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism and the ICFI's struggle against the pseudo left, it immediately pointed to the class gulf separating Podemos from the working class.

At the time of Podemos' foundation in April 2014, the WSWS warned that its "model is SYRIZA in Greece—a bourgeois party whose leaders publicly indulge in 'left' demagogy, while privately reassuring the leaders of world imperialism that they have nothing to fear should it come to power." After Podemos entered the EU parliament the next month, the WSWS warned that Podemos had the "aim of preventing a rebellion by the working class against the social democratic parties and the trade union bureaucracy, and channelling discontent into supposedly radical, but pro-capitalist formations."

After Podemos continued backing Syriza even after it betrayed its promises to end EU austerity in Greece, the WSWS wrote: "As the crisis of capitalism places on the order of the day the re-eruption of the wars and revolutionary struggles that marked the 20th century, these pseudo-left forces step forward as guardians of order. The conclusion they drew from the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe ... is that capitalism is the only game in town. They are politically and ideologically conditioned to serve as bribed tools of finance capital."

These assessments have been proven completely correct: the working class can defend its interests only in a ruthless political struggle against the type of cynical, middle-class pseudo-left politics Podemos represents. What it needs is not a restored Podemos, but a party offering political leadership and a socialist perspective for the international overthrow of capitalism. The task now is to build new sections of the ICFI in Spain, in Greece, across Europe and internationally.